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Degree of Contact and Local Perceptions of Tourism Impacts: A Case Study of Homestay Programme in Sarawak

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship of the different degrees of contact between the locals and the tourists which affect the locals' perceptions of the tourism impacts, and analyses how these perceptions explain their support for additional tourism development or restrictions at Kampung Benuk (KB) homestay. A semi-structured interview based on snowball sampling was conducted and the data were analysed manually. Results revealed that different degrees of contact affect the locals' perceptions of the tourism impacts and the support for tourism development. The findings provided strategies for the government and other tourism agencies to increase the benefits of the homestay programme.

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, a homestay programme is one of the tourism initiatives by the government. The local people that have the interest to share knowledge of culture are encouraged to get involved in the tourism activities. The local people can generate income from the selling of the handmade-handicraft products, for example, bangles or basket made from rattan. The homestay programme in Malaysia also gives chance to the locals to get to know other people from other countries during the homestay visits. This homestay programme gives the opportunities to the tourists to

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experience the lifestyles of the local people (Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, MOTAC, 2013). A number of past studies on the homestay programme have been conducted (Bhuiyan, Siwar & Mohamad Ismail, 2013; Jamaludin, Othman & Awang, 2012). However, the findings of these past studies were limited because the researchers had observed the local people as a homogeneous group (Brunt & Courtney, 1999). While the number of studies about the homestay programme is increasing, a recent study conducted by Ebrahimi and Khalifah (2014) highlighted the lack of the perception study that involves the other members of the host community besides the homestay operators. They emphasized that the "communities are not a homogeneous people either they support or do not support the tourism industry" (p.29). Thus, besides considering the perceptions from the homestay operators, the perceptions from the other members of the host community are also crucial to be studied otherwise "problems and conflicts arise may delay the pace of tourism development" (Ebrahimi & Khalifah, 2014, p.29). Earlier on, Brunt and Courtney (1999) affirmed that diverse perceptions can be obtained if the local people are viewed as a heterogeneous group despite living in a small community. Thus, their perceptions can either be positive or negative. This also means that the impacts of tourism can either influence the local people to support for additional tourism development or support for restrictions on tourism development. To obtain information from the local people, a qualitative approach was employed in this study. As highlighted by Ebrahimi and Khalifah (2014), this approach is suitable to obtain information for a study that involves the other members of the host community besides the homestay operators. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine how the degrees of contact between the locals and the tourists affect their perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of tourism and lead to their perceptions toward support for additional tourism development or restrictions on tourism development in KB. The research questions for this study were:

- How do the degrees of contact affect the local perceptions of the social impact of tourism in KB?
- How do the degrees of contact affect the local perceptions of the cultural impact of tourism in KB?
- To what extent the perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of tourism derived from the different degrees of contact, relate to the local support for additional tourism development or support for restrictions on tourism development in KB?

2. Degree of Contact and Local Perceptions of Tourism Impacts

The local perceptions of the impacts of tourism can be understood by looking into the different degrees of contact between the locals and the tourists. Understanding these perceptions is crucial because the involvement of local people in tourism indicates the presence of decision-making processes in a tourism destination. A study on residents' perceptions and attitudes toward the tourism impacts in Folgaria, Italy by Brida, Osti and Faccioli (2011) found the significant differences from each group of locals. In their study, the 'protectionist' group perceived that tourism had more negative impacts than positive impacts. For example, tourism benefited only a certain group of local people. Based on this explanation, although the impacts of tourism are many, the perceptions from the local people are various owing to the differences in the degrees of contact with the tourists in the tourism destination. The perceptions of tourism impacts from the local people depend on how they view the tourism activities in the destination. Numerous authors found out that local people were positive with the social impacts if they accept the changes in tourism (Long, 2012). Therefore, perceptions from the local people are worth to be identified because some locals are enjoying the tourism activities while others feel inconvenience by noise or crowd associated with the activities. Gjerald (2005) stated that "in order to see how tourism affects small local communities, one has to look into the residents' own perceptions of the tourism impacts" (p.42). Some past studies revealed that the local people were positive toward the future of tourism development in their area, although tourism has impacted them negatively (Horn, Simmons & Fairweather, 2000). Brida *et al.*, (2011) stated a number of positive responds from the residents. In their study, tourism was considered as a factor that contributes to a higher standard of living and tourism provided more facilities and services to the residents. The cultural impact of tourism is not easy to measure as compared to the social impact. The "diversity of the culture" (Frater, 1996, p.7) leads to various ways of how the local people perceive the tourism impacts in their area. A great cultural exchange between the local people and the tourists in tourism "changes the traditional culture, and it decreases the lifestyle quality" (Spanou, 2007, p.152) of the local people. Furthermore, Frater (1996) stated that "because differences in cultural behaviour between tourists and local communities are sometimes so great, the mutual understanding is replaced by antipathy" (p.32), and then the relationship between the local people and the tourists converges to form the negative impacts. Not only that, the increasing demand for cultural

activities such as cultural dances whereby the steps of the dances were incorrectly choreographed in order to make the dances more interesting have resulted in the degradation of the culture of the local people (Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Long, 2012).

3. Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the connection between the different degrees of contact with the tourism impacts as perceived by the local people, two theories have been employed for this study, namely 1) Social Exchange Theory (Ap, 1992); and 2) Model of Resident Tourism Perceptions and Attitudes (Perdue, Long & Allen, 1990).

3.1. Social exchange theory

The first theory which is the Social Exchange Theory (SET) defined as "a general sociological theory concerned with understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interactive situation" (Ap, 1992, p.668). In a context of a tourism destination, the local people are positive towards tourism if the benefit is more than the cost, and negative with the tourism activity if the cost of tourism is greater than the benefit (Ap, 1992). A number of past studies that have employed the SET as the basis in their studies showed that the SET is a well-accepted and a suitable framework to analyse the local perceptions of the tourism impacts and its development. The findings of these researches have concluded that the local people were positive with tourism when several benefits were provided to them (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf & Vogt, 2005; Brida *et al*., 2011; Latkova, 2008). Thus, many researchers who have conducted the studies to evaluate the local perceptions of the tourism impacts have selected this theory as the theoretical framework (Andereck *et al*., 2005; Brida *et al*., 2011; Latkova, 2008). For this study, the SET was selected as the theoretical framework to understand the relationship between the benefit or the cost of tourism and the perceptions from the local people toward the impacts of tourism.

3.2. Model of resident tourism perceptions and attitudes

By investigating the benefits and the costs of tourism as perceived by the local people, support for the development of tourism can be determined. A Model of Resident Tourism Perceptions and Attitudes by Perdue, Long, and Allen (1990) was also adopted in this study. This model assists to determine whether the local people with the positive perceptions of tourism impacts, will support for additional tourism development or support for restrictions on tourism development. The model asserts that the local people who show support for additional tourism development are likely to perceive the tourism impacts positively. This model also suggests that the local people who support for additional tourism development receive more benefits than costs from the tourism activities. In contrast, the local people decline to support the future of tourism development if they support for restrictions on tourism development in their area.

4. Conceptual Framework

The two frameworks as described earlier were combined to construct a conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 1). Based on this framework, the local people that received the benefits more than the costs of tourism are likely to be positive with the tourism activities. Thus, they are likely to be supportive for additional tourism development in the destination. Unlike those with the negative perceptions toward the impacts of tourism, they are prone to be pessimistic about the tourism development. To increase the benefits from the tourism activities, it is crucial to gain support from the local people. Thus, this framework shows that the positive perceptions from the local people are extended to the support for additional tourism development. In contrast, the negative perceptions are extended to the support for restrictions on tourism development. This framework deemed relevant in this study to analyse whether the local perceptions toward the social and cultural impacts of tourism based on the different degrees of contact explain the local support for tourism development or support for restrictions on tourism development in KB. Finally, the future of tourism development was examined as the results from the local perceptions toward the impacts of tourism and their support for the tourism development in KB.
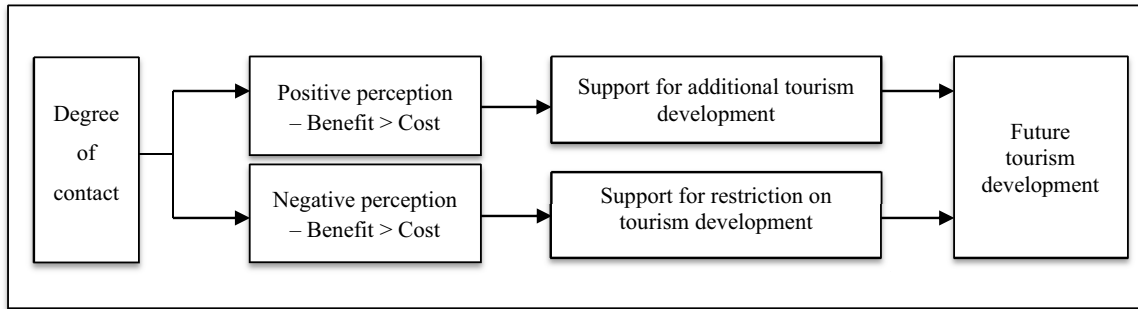
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework (adapted from Ap, 1992 and Perdue, Long and Allen, 1990).

5. Methodology

5.1. Sample

The most applicable sampling technique in this study was a snowball sampling. This sampling technique was appropriate for this study because "much information can become available" (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997, p.795). Following Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), the total of six to twelve respondents for an interview is enough to "achieve a desired research objective" (p.79). In this study, twelve respondents were selected. The total was sufficient because the saturation level usually reached at the twelfth interview (Guest *et al*., 2006). The local people that involved directly in the homestay programme and received profits from the programme were categorised under the High Contact category (HC). Four respondents who were the homestay operators and a clerk who was working at the Tourism Information Centre (TIC) have been interviewed. The local people that owned the grocery shops and involved in the small-scale businesses were categorised under the Medium Contact category (MC). These grocers were not involved in the homestay programme. Respondents under the Low Contact category (LC) have no interest in participating in the homestay programme. They were reluctant to involve in the programme due to the unsatisfactory health conditions or perhaps not interested at all in joining the homestay activities in the village. For this category, the pensioners and the housewives in KB were interviewed. There were 4 respondents for all the three categories and this has made up a total of twelve respondents altogether. Following Patton (2002), the first person to be interviewed is a "well-situated" person and knows a lot about the homestay programme and its development in KB. After the interview with the first respondent, he or she was asked to nominate the next potential individual who is from the same category or from the other two categories of contact. The interviews were held at their respective house. The data was collected between 14th December and 22nd December 2013.

5.2. Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview with a face-to-face interviewing was selected and most appropriate in obtaining more insightful information about the local perceptions of the tourism impacts. Berg (1995) mentioned that "interview is usually defined simply as a conversation with a purpose" (p.29). Thus, the researcher gathered the information needed regarding to the local perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of tourism in KB. During the interview, the researcher communicated in Bahasa Melayu Sarawak language given that most of the respondents were not able to communicate fluently in English language. Interviews were then transcribed and translated into the English language. Note-taking was also employed to check for consistency and back up the notes with the tape-recorded interviews. Following Warren (2002) who mentioned that the total number of interview question is between 10 to 12 questions, the interview questions in this study were structured as a set of 12 specific questions altogether. The interview questions were divided into three sections. Section One comprised of three questions to achieve the first objective of this study. Section Two was to determine the support from the local people for additional tourism development or the

restrictions on tourism development. Five questions were asked to achieve the second objective of this study. Section Three consisted of two questions to examine the future of the tourism development in KB. All these questions were developed by the researcher based on the conceptual framework for this study. To achieve the reliability in the qualitative study, the researcher read every page of the transcripts to check for any grammatical errors, punctuations, or unnecessary words. Every sentence has been translated from the Bahasa Melayu language (Bahasa Melayu Sarawak) to the English language and then checked to maintain the meaning of each answer. The codes were compared with the answers given by the respondents to avoid the shift in its meaning during the coding process. Following Patton (2002), while reading the responses given by the respondents, a brief note was written at the margin to form themes. Relevant responses were sustained and written on a paper in which the interview questions asked during the interview had been written in advance. Then, the similar responses were colour-coded. Finally, the responses that have been organized according to the same themes were transferred into a matrix form.

6. Finding and Discussion

The findings of this study provide an adequate explanation about the local perceptions that influenced by their different degrees of contact with the tourists in KB (see Figure 2).
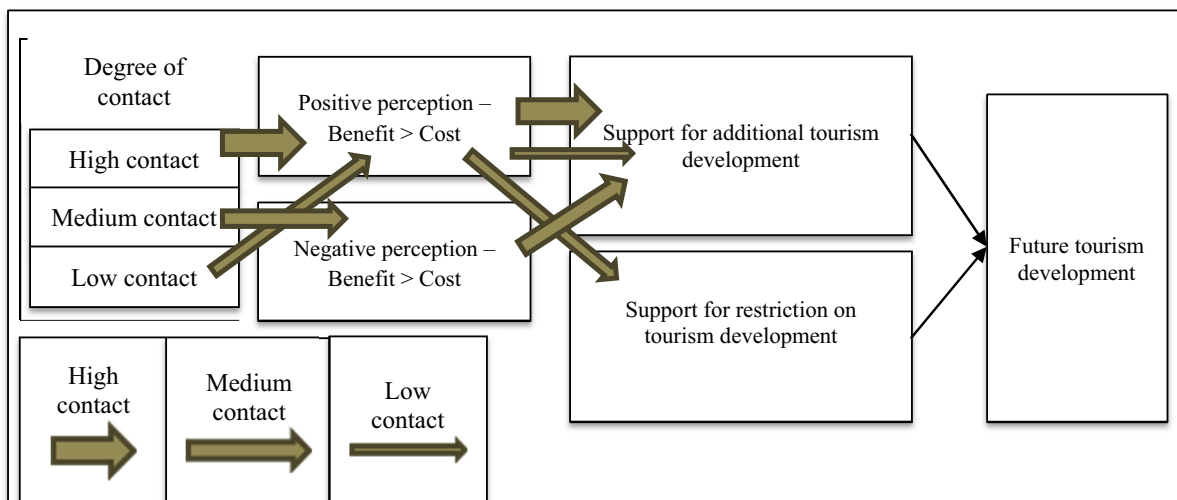

Fig. 2. The conceptual framework on local perceptions of the tourism impacts based on the different degrees of contact in KB.

The findings of this study show that the positive perceptions from the HC respondents indicated that the homestay programme has provided more benefits than costs. These positive perceptions show that the homestay operators are receiving benefits, such as a job opportunity to become an operator and obtaining additional income from hosting the homestay tourists in KB. This finding is consistent with that of Brunt and Courtney (1999) that the local people with the high contact with the tourists associated tourism with the job opportunities. This finding is also similar to the description of the SET in which the positive perceptions were derived from the benefits that an individual obtained from tourism activities. Furthermore, according to Brida *et al.,* (2011), 'tourism supporters' did not feel that tourism decreased their lifestyles instead provided more job opportunities such as hosting the guests. This finding is supported by previous research including that done by Sharma and Dyer (2009) which found that locals received income from tourism will perceive tourism positively. Most of the respondents in the 'HC' category agreed that the homestay programme had improved their quality of life. The programme was seen not only as helping to promote the local culture and products, but the community as well. Therefore, this category encouraged more tourists to visit the homestay so as to get the opportunity to see the traditions and the lifestyles of the local people. On cultural aspects,

the respondents commented that the homestay programme encouraged them to wear the Bidayuh traditional clothes, encouraged the youngsters to learn to play the gong, and increased their pride for their own culture. These positive perceptions were deemed important in a sense that a homestay programme was a platform for the local people to display their unique culture, especially to the international tourists. The respondents were very supportive for additional tourism development and thus, able to see the positive future of the homestay programme in KB. Respondents that perceived benefits more than costs of tourism were very supportive for additional tourism development in KB. They also mentioned that there should be no restrictions for the tourists to come to KB so that there will be more activities provided for the tourists. This perception indicates that most of the respondents for this study expressed their hopes for the programme to continue to develop by encouraging more domestic and international tourists to the homestay. This was consistent with the findings of Perdue *et al.,* (1990): the more positive locals are towards tourism, the more they support for additional tourism development in their area. In KB, it was not significant that the grocers earn profits through selling toiletries or other necessities to the homestay tourists. When the grocers were asked about the profits they obtained from their small-scale businesses, most of them agreed that the activities of bargaining of goods by the tourists did not bring significant benefits to their businesses. This negative perception of the homestay programme in KB is in line with SET in which the local people will have negative perceptions of the tourism impacts if the cost of tourism is more than the benefit. It was also found that the grocers disagreed with the frequent visits by the tourists to the longhouse and the mini museum. The result is consistent with several previous studies stated that limited communication between the local people and the tourists led to the negative perception towards the young people (Gjerald, 2005; Horn *et al.*, 2000). In terms of cultural negative impacts of tourism, many respondents were more concerned about the degradation of the culture caused by the homestay programme. Only respondents under the 'LC' and the 'MC' category perceived negatively towards the culture in relation to the cultural performances and activities prepared for the homestay tourists. The opposition towards the homestay programme in KB was also derived from the grocer who highlighted the modification made to the Bidayuh traditional dance. This respondent labelled the problem as showing a gesture of 'dishonest' with the tourists. To quote, he stated:

> "*It is because the dance is not real. So when the tourists see the dance, they thought that the dance was real and traditionally designed. However, the villagers know that the dance is not real.*"

However, another respondent who was also a grocer observed that the money derived from the homestay programme could be used "to help others." Given that the grocers did not receive benefits directly from the homestay programme, their positive perception towards the development of the programme in the future was inconsistent with the notion of SET suggesting that those who received benefits more than costs of tourism would be very positive about tourism. In this study, the grocers did not receive benefits, be it in monetary form or other experiences like meeting tourists from other countries, from the homestay programme. However, this negative perception did not influence the grocers to impede the effort by the homestay operators and other members of the host community to promote the homestay programme to the outsiders. Therefore, the grocers agreed that the homestay programme is thriving into the future and thus, allowing for more tourists to come into the village and more homestay activities to help to improve the quality of life of the locals. Furthermore, it was found that the respondents in this category had high hopes for the homestay programme in the village to continue to develop so that this programme benefits not only the homestay operators but also the grocers in the village. This finding was inconsistent with the finding of study by Perdue *et al.,* (1990) that the local people with the negative perceptions of the tourism impacts are likely to support for restrictions on tourism development. The 'LC' respondents agreed that more homestay activities should be provided for both the locals and the tourists, so that more tourists will come to the homestay. The finding of this study is in line with the finding of Kayat (2008), where residents who did not participate in the homestay programme were not negative towards the programme. In fact, the local people in KB were still positive towards the future of the homestay programme. This finding reveals that the homestay programme was perceived as the factor that influenced the success as well as created issues in KB. The finding of this study indicated that the local people who were categorised in the 'LC' category seemed to support for additional tourism development and support for restrictions on tourism development in KB. This was seen through the support to increase the number of tourist arrivals to the village. They were also agreed to have more homestay activities held in the village so that the village would be livelier. The respondents were still hopeful to see more tourists come to the village to experience the lifestyles of the local people.

The respondents pointed out that the homestay programme had provided an opportunity for them to greet domestic and international tourists. The finding from this study is in line with Gjerald (2005), who suggested that "both those who depend economically on the tourism industry and those who do not, perceived tourism positively" (p.53). The findings from this study also provide evidence for the argument by Brida *et al*., (2011) that the local people were neither supporting nor opposing the tourism activities regarded the activities as factors leading to prosperity or perhaps problems to the local people.

7. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

Several conclusions were drawn from the results of this study. The element of different degrees of contact has a role in determining the local perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of tourism in KB. The findings of this study revealed that even though the negative impacts perceived were more than the positive impacts, the local people were still supportive of additional tourism development in KB. The perceptions toward the tourism impacts from the local people with the different degrees of contact with the tourists explained the varieties in the perceptions toward the homestay programme and its impacts in KB. Even though the perceptions from the local people with the different degrees of contact were not similar, the local perceptions of the social and cultural impacts of tourism had an obvious influence on how they supported additional tourism development or supported restrictions on tourism development in KB. This enhancement is through examining the various perceptions from the local people from other homestays, particularly the registered homestays in Kuching, Sarawak. Several recommendations can be considered for future research. Detailed conflicts or issues faced by the local people can be identified if the local people are regarded as a heterogeneous group. By involving the other members of the host community, more insightful information about the local perceptions of the tourism impacts can be obtained. It is recommended that the interview questions to be designed in a simpler and more comprehensible way. Thus, an effective way of probing the respondents is needed to obtain richer information.

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